

## ABSTRACT

Forbidden Salvation

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Princess Ilenia's beloved Sae kingdom is locked in war with the powerful Medean empire. When the dark elf Perilon arrives in the kingdom and kidnaps the Sae Queen and Medean King, Ilenia is forced to ally with her archenemy, the Medean Prince Hiatin, on a desperate quest to save their parents. Along with her shape-shifting companion, a young Prilix girl, and a dangerous dazpen, Ilenia and Hiatin traverse the continent in search of an elven diadem that may be the only way to defeat Perilon. Along the way, Ilenia and Hiatin struggle to reconcile their differences, jeopardizing the mission. In the end, Ilenia must come to terms with her own powers in order to finally triumph over the dark elf. Facing her own fears and failures, Ilenia overcomes her pride to save her mother, her kingdom, and the entire continent from destruction.

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FORBIDDEN SALVATION

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## INTRODUCTION

My first memories of stories are fuzzy and vague. I recall sitting up in my parents' bed, nestled in amongst the mounds of pillows and blankets with my younger sister as our mom read *Harry Potter* to us. Flash forward several years to where I knew how to read and was then reading the same books to my youngest sister. I remember spending afternoons pitching my voice to capture the different characters throughout the story while my sister lay beside me in bed. Whenever we came across a word she was unfamiliar with, such as tawny, I lugged up the enormous dictionary we had and made her look it up. To this day, she credits me with her dislike for the dictionary, that had come to be more of a punishment than the learning experience I had intended.

From those first moments as the magical world of Harry Potter unraveled in my mind, I was in love with books and stories, especially fantasy. The stories that filled my childhood were enriched with magic and far-off lands. I learned my Hogwarts house as soon as Pottermore went up with its official Sorting Hat quiz (Ravenclaw, naturally). Greek myths, both originals and the revamped versions of the Percy Jackson series, inspired countless games with my sisters as we pretended we were descendants of various gods with unique abilities. The *Spiderwick Chronicles* gave me new eyes to see the world, imbuing even the most mundane mushroom patch with supernatural significance, and broken glass was suddenly far more terrifying as a hallmark of goblins. Eragon was one of the first epics that ensnared my mind. The scope of the work was staggering and it inspired me from a young age to seek to accomplish the same some day. To craft a world that people wanted to visit and explore was a dream that I harbored from an early age.

I began the journey into writing at a young age. I still have journals from fourth grade. We were supposed to write an entry every day. In mine, I spun a tale of deception, murder, and family. Looking back, it was rather grim, especially for a fourth grader. The feedback I received from my teacher and classmates was praise and encouragement to continue telling the story. Many of the comments in the margins urged me to finish, so people could know what happened next. I never did complete that story. I was overwhelmed by the idea of having to somehow finish the great drama I had started and, scared by the challenge, I let the story fade away.

Despite this, stories remained a part of my path throughout school. In elementary school, we completed an autobiography project, in which I took enormous liberties to dramatize the tale of my childhood. The account of the night I was born was largely inaccurate but in my mind was far more interesting in my telling. In elementary and middle school, I was exposed to Shakespeare and theater. I learned how to write and tell a story from one of the greatest writers of all time. We read *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *Taming of the Shrew*, *Macbeth*, and several more. We also acted out scenes from many of his works. The more I learned about stories, the more I sought to create my own. Tales of mermaids, witches, and dragons brewed in my imagination over the years.

My interest in writing took on new life when I started studying neuroscience and writing at Baylor. An intriguing idea stuck out to me—our brain loves stories. It made so much sense looking back on my own life. Stories, whether they were books or films or television shows, inspired the games my sisters and I played. They colored how I saw the world. But science took it a step further. It showed that the very memories we have, the records of our lives we preserve in our minds, are stories constructed by our brains.

What we remember is an imprint of the actual experience that is available to inform our behavior in a new scenario. The areas of the brain that have increased activity when remembering are almost identical to those whose activity increases when we envision the future (Gilmore, Nelson, Chen, & McDermott, 2018). It makes sense that our brain would be wired for story because it allows us to learn without practical experience. If we all had to face down a tiger to understand that they are dangerous and can kill us, we as a species would not be around. But if we could communicate with each other stories warning about the dangers of tigers, then we could participate in social learning. In this way, stories can act as simulators that allow us to learn in safety without encountering real danger (Gottschall, 2012). And the more fantastical stories we tell today are integrated into our brains too. Even if they seem to bear little physiological importance to survival they still impact our perspectives. While none of us will be called upon to defeat Voldemort with complicated spells, our brain will remember the event and the displays of courage and bravery shown by the students that day.

Stories are so important that they impact our brains all the way down to the physiological level. When we hear stories, we release actual hormones in our bodies—cortisol from the stress the protagonist faces, oxytocin as we sympathize with the characters, and dopamine as we experience an invigorating new world (Murray TEDx, 2014). They trigger activity in mirror neurons such that when you go to a movie and see a young kid bouncing around in his seat, mimicking the onscreen action, what you are witnessing is the child's brain reacting to the onscreen stimulus. It hasn't learned to dissociate what it sees from its own actions and thus performs them personally. As adults, we are often able to resist this temptation though we aren't always successful.

Ever clench up in a tense moment of a book or duck when something flies at the screen? That's your mirror neurons processing the onscreen action and inciting action in you (Zacks, 2015).

Human beings are made for stories. That has perhaps been one of the greatest surprises I have learned in studying neuroscience. I didn't anticipate when I entered the field that it would end up leading me back to my passion for writing.

In this excitement, however, comes a note of warning. Since stories impact us to such an extent, we have to take care what stories we tell. Many of my memories from childhood involved telling a story or immersing into a story through playing with my sisters. Heroes I aspired to emulate -- Hermione Granger from *Harry Potter*, Annabeth Chase from *Percy Jackson*, Kim Possible from *Kim Possible*, and the X-men -- came from stories. They were as much a part of my world as anything I could physically touch.

I have come to understand Plato's point in the *Timaeus* that stories are a culture's memory, without which we "are always children" (S. J. Murray, 2008). The stories of the past give us visions of possible futures that influence our decisions in the present. Through their staying power, stories can inform our actions and our values. For this reason, Plato was wary of what stories he allowed in his ideal city of the *Republic*. It is the responsibility of the storyteller to understand the weight her words can carry and to use the power she wields with discretion. It is for this reason that I labored over the premise that focused my story. The ideals that I left the audience with when they closed the back cover of the novel should be ones that enrich them to go on to greater endeavors.

Over the next pages I seek to reveal the process through which my story arose, focused on the premise like on a guiding star, and populated by characters whose adventures can impact society in a positive way.

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One of the key points in developing my story was settling on the premise (Egri, 2009). A premise is a concise description of the conflict within the story. It directs the story as the author “champions one side of the issue” to argue throughout the work. For some time, I couldn’t settle on one idea. As I wrote drafts I found a multitude of values I would love to address in a story: success, fear, sense of self... As I thought on it, I realized that many of the ideas I wanted to look at could all be boiled down to pride. So one value would be pride. The contrasting value was perhaps even more difficult to pin down. Humility seemed the most obvious answer, though also the most general and broad response to pride. My own work on this project ended up supplying the idea for the contrasting value.

For my story, the premise is forgiveness versus pride. I came to see the two as antithetical components. Forgiveness involves humility whether it involves forgiving someone else, forgiving yourself, or moving on from an experience. It acknowledges that a wrong was committed and needs reparation, but it does not need to impede growth. Pride, on the other hand, prevents growth because it nullifies awareness of shortcomings. It stunts forgiveness in its tracks because there is no room for error in pride. It’s a dilemma I face in my own behavior and one that came out in the story quite naturally, giving the whole tale a rather autobiographical feel as I worked. The fear of failure, the

confrontation of failure, and the humility to move beyond it were all experiences while writing this thesis as much as they serve to drive the events of the actual novel.

In this novel, Perilon champions pride while Ilenia champions forgiveness. This is not to say that Ilenia doesn't struggle with pride, in fact the book is about her movement toward forgiveness. Perilon as the antagonist, however, is locked into pride. She doesn't learn to overcome this and move to forgiveness. Because she is unable to learn the lesson and let go of the past, she ends up destroyed at the end. Ilenia, on the other hand, journeys with her archenemy and learns to love him by the end. She learns that forgiving mistakes is difficult. Through learning to forgive herself for her own mistakes, she comes to understand the importance of forgiving others as well. When she is able to let go of her past, her relationships with people progress until she finds an unexpected ally in the Medean prince.

Whenever Ilenia confronts Perilon, a main point of their dissention is whether to revive the old elven country of Levire. For Perilon, this represents the undoing of her mistakes. It will be as if she never destroyed the elves and their world and she can for all intents and purposes pretend it never happened. For Ilenia, this is a chance to be united with elves where she may feel like less of an outcast. It's a chance to use her powers for something good rather than the negative aspects that have been associated with it throughout her life. But for Ilenia, the world is not simply elves. She has grown up at the crux of both men and elves. And as she travels to other kingdoms, meeting the people there, seeing that goodness exists even in the midst of enormous prejudice, she comes to realize that fixing the mistakes of the past doesn't mean undoing it. It means moving on in a better direction that involves everyone. Here is where the conflict between the two is

most evident. Perilon is willing to sacrifice people's lives for Levire, while Ilenia is willing to sacrifice Levire for people's lives.

Sophrina, as the B character, also served to help Ilenia grow in forgiveness. Sophrina shows a childlike innocence and joy that comes from forgiveness, though she isn't mature enough to understand it as such. She accepts people fully, even with their flaws. This trait of hers helps guide Ilenia in the same way. For Sophrina, both Ilenia and Hiatin are her friends without question. And it is largely through her unconditional acceptance of both that the two are able to reconcile their differences, spelling out hope that their two kingdoms will do the same.

I knew I wanted the tale to be a novel from the beginning. As long as I can remember, I have been drawn to novels. The way an entire world could be crafted on the page was exciting. You open up a book and within the covers is an entire universe that someone imagined. And yet, as grand a scope as that is, there is also the ability to come in extremely close to a character and experience the world through them. In thinking over my story, I knew I wanted it to be a grand fantasy adventure. A novel, as compared to a novella, gave me more space to develop that world with all its faceted layers, including kingdoms, magic, and creatures. Then a novel, rather than a screenplay, also gave me the chance to be in Ilenia's perspective, experiencing this world. I could give insights into the world from what she noticed and what she commented on. I could show the conflicts and tensions in a room by the way she acted around certain people. In this form, I could develop an entire world but give the reader the centralized experience of an individual. That's one of my favorite aspects of novels and one I strove to accomplish in these pages.

The structure for my book follows the story beats (or “building blocks”) outlined in *Basics of Story Design* (Murray, 2017):

### **Act One**

- **Opening Image** You are kept close with the protagonist, Ilenia, as she and her best friend fight throughout the field. You get a glimpse of their friendship, their surprising comfort at being in a war zone, and meet other supporting characters including Narok, Ilenia’s shape shifting companion, and Hiatin, Ilenia’s love interest.
- **Ordinary World** Here, Ilenia heals and scouts for the camp. It shows that though she is a princess, she operates daily on a more mundane level. She trains with the other soldiers, knows her unit well, and participates in the duties around camp. She also shows her tendency to push herself too hard, refusing to take a break even when she may need to. During this sequence, hints of dazpen activity and the near presence of the enemy Medean army indicate the conflict brewing constantly around Ilenia’s world.
- **Inciting Incident** Kritten, a stranger to the camp, is brought into the healing tent. He is severely wounded, his body harboring large amounts of a dangerous magic, life magic. Ilenia also possesses this same gift though it is taboo to use due to a cataclysmic occurrence that wiped out half the continent a millennium earlier. The reappearance of this particular magic is concerning because Ilenia believed she was the only one alive with this ability. This scene is the inciting incident

because it hints to the existence of Perilon, the novel's antagonist and the elf whose life magic caused the cataclysm. It also introduces one of the magical creatures of the book, the dazpen.

- **Dilemma** Perilon appears in the flesh. She kidnaps Ilenia's mother, the Sae Queen, along with Hiatin's father, the Medean King. During the encounter, Ilenia comes face to face with her. This interaction sparks Ilenia's life magic and, terrified she'll lose control, Ilenia runs away. Through this scene Ilenia's fear of her magic is established, along with her severe lack of control over a significant portion of it. We also get the sense that she knows Perilon. Though not made clear till the middle of the book, this is not their first encounter and the weight of that secret is felt in the dilemma.
- **Crossing the Threshold** For Ilenia, this moment comes at a time of desperation. She needs to rescue her mother but in order to do that she needs to acquire Levire crystals from the far kingdom of Tenven. These crystals absorb magic so Ilenia cannot handle them. Thus she needs the help of Prince Hiatin, her sworn enemy, who becomes an ally of necessity. Both desperate to save their parents, they agree to a shaky alliance for the purposes of bringing them home safe.

## **Act Two**

- **A New Friend** It's here that we meet Sophrina, a young girl about twelve years old, who is a Prilix. Prilix is another kingdom of the world, as well as the name of the people who live there. Due to centuries of living closely with the land and hunting animals, these people have acquired animal traits in the form of claws,

tails, ears, and more. Sophrina was born with dazpen qualities—a tail, ears, and magical immunity. Because of this, she has formed a tight connection with a dazpen named Ansen who is her closest friend as well as her protector. Sophrina acts as Ilenia’s foil. She has this fearlessness that Ilenia learns from. While many view Sophrina’s traits as horrific, since the dazpen are so feared, Sophrina revels in her abilities and adores Ansen. Sophrina believes in Ilenia and stands by her side through everything, helping to pull her out of dark situations later in the story.

- **Character Moment 1** Ilenia’s first character moment came rather unexpectedly. I was writing the scene and suddenly Ilenia was walking around, talking and acting, and I just had to write to keep up. It’s this point where she humbles herself enough to bow to the Tenven monarchs and begs them to help. Earlier in the book she protests to Hiatin that she would never bow to anyone but this scene shows what she is willing to do for her people. It goes back to her tenacity and selflessness seen in the ordinary world. When all she wants is to collapse, she keeps working to help. And this moment highlights the sacrifices she is forced to make during the quest.
- **Midpoint** For Ilenia, this moment is her willing confession to releasing Perilon from imprisonment. And this drives a sharp wedge between her and Hiatin, whose trust and friendship had developed through the first half of the act. It results in her arrest and lands her in the Tenven dungeons, completely cut off from everyone and helpless. Since in the end of the story she is victorious, this moment is a false low point. Here, things look very bleak.

- **Character Moment 2** While Ilenia's first character moment showed her selflessness for her people, her second character moment reveals her growing trust. In this scene, she allows Hiatin to work with her to develop control of the forbidden life magic. It's her first voluntary attempts with the magic in a controlled setting. And for Hiatin, this shows his character growth as he transitions from flinching away from even healing magic at the beginning to now initiating Ilenia's training.
- **Brick Wall** The brick wall was always a firm point in my mind. From the very beginning of crafting my story, from the first outlines with Princess Fiona rushing through time, I knew the brick wall was going to be coming face to face with the dark elf and losing badly. And even throughout the draft revisions, this was one of the easiest scenes for me to envision and write. For this version, Ilenia loses everything and ends up alone at the end of the scene. Narok is dead, Perilon has kidnapped Hiatin, Sophrina is missing, and Ilenia couldn't face Perilon's magic. From the beginning, Ilenia's actions have led to this point. Everything she has done has built into this moment where she has nothing. Sophrina's words help shake Ilenia out of her pitying. This is helped by the revelation that Narok is not dead. Through her life magic, Ilenia managed to save him during the confrontation with Perilon. Faith in herself, her friends, and her magic restored, Ilenia is able to break through the brick wall and charge into the third act to face Perilon.

### **Act Three**

- **Plan** Ilenia and her team race to Qanon to capture Perilon in the gems and save Hiatin.
- **Plan Working** This unfolds as the various armies from the kingdoms all assemble to face Perilon together. Similar to Hiatin and Ilenia in the beginning, this is an alliance of necessity, and there is a great deal of reluctance. It's complicated by the fact that Perilon now has all the heads of state for all the kingdoms and is slowly killing them off. Faced with a consortium of the kingdoms, Perilon has resurrected her own army of elven forces to contend with them and protect her.
- **Plan Fails** Perilon seeks to destroy the armies of men while Ilenia tries to protect them. During this time, Perilon also kills Hiatin, making him into the sleeping beauty of my story.
- **Climax** Ilenia is forced to contend with Perilon magically and physically. They have a duel of swords while overhead, their magic battles for control. Ilenia, with the aid of her friends, is able to overcome Perilon and kill her.
- **Resolution** Ilenia revives Hiatin with her magic and the story closes on a world where there are hints of a changing world order and a possible peace sometime in the future.

In reading the origin of one of my favorite book series, *Throne of Glass* by Sarah J Maas, the author discussed how the idea for the whole series came from the simple question: “*what if* Cinderella went to the ball to kill the prince.” And from that came a tale of princes and princesses, assassins and witches, magic and Faerie, all set in an extraordinary fantastical world. Inspired by this idea of taking fairy tales and reusing

them, I pondered the fairy tales that I loved. Eventually, I alighted upon the query of what if Sleeping Beauty dreamt during her hundred-year sleep. What possibilities were unlocked if she had her own adventures at that time?

My original concept was rooted in the idea of time travel. I envisioned a series of three or four books in which the princess traveled to a different time in each book, working alongside and saving a different man each time. In the end of the series it was revealed that the men she saved were the ancestors of her true love throughout history. Thus she was just as much the savior of her prince as he was of her. While I loved this idea, working out how to properly communicate and work with time travel in the context of the book would overcomplicate the plot and led to the idea being nixed.

In transitioning on to future story renditions, I wanted to keep the part of the story where the princess plays an active role, rather than the more complacent part she has in the *Sleeping Beauty* story in all its renditions. Many of my favorite books inspired this. *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, *Throne of Glass* by Sarah J Maas, Michelle Moran's historical fiction books, *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling, all these and countless more have held up great female role models throughout my life. In writing my own story, I was drawn to this archetype of a heroine and the different dimensions that could bring to a story. I especially loved the idea of the princess and the prince saving each other, instilling a mutual respect and trust in the relationship born from their efforts to protect and defend one another.

As the story outline went through innumerable drafts and rewrites, many of the elements of the original *Sleeping Beauty* inspiration faded. I considered for some time incorporating the three fairies, the rose, and even just the color schemes of blue and pink

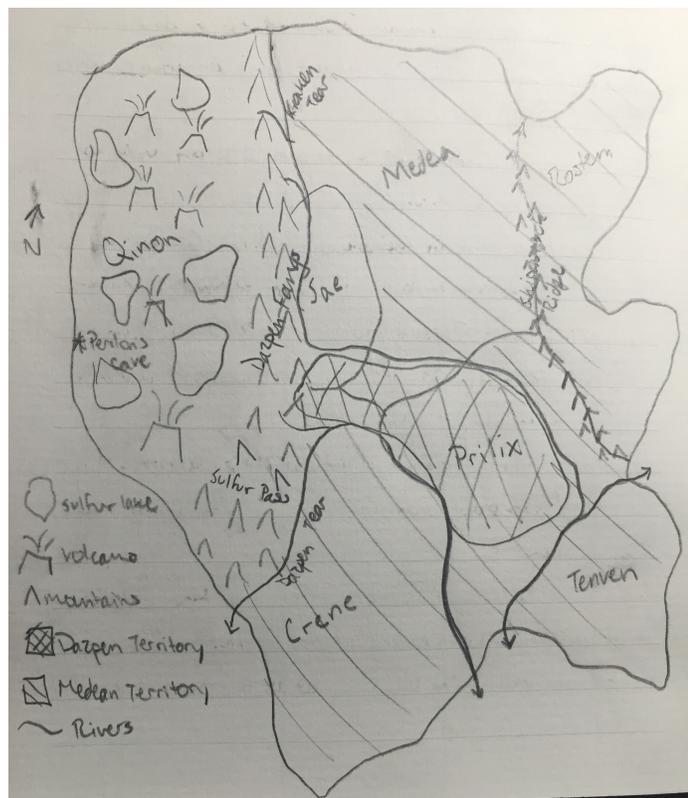
into the story. However, throughout the development process the story grew more independent of its inspiration. One crucial piece I kept, however, was the ending. When Prince Hiatin is saved from death, this moment calls back to the original story and the resurrection of Aurora from her deathlike sleep.

One of the most challenging aspects of my story was interiority. Basically anything not written for the stage or screen has the opportunity to take you deep into a character's perspective. Since I wrote this in close third on Princess Ilenia, I could show the world through her eyes while also dipping into the thoughts she had throughout the adventure. A challenge here was to not slip then into exposition. Finding the line between explaining something Ilenia was processing and just throwing information at the audience has been difficult, and there are many places where it was not achieved in this novel. From classes, one method to aid in establishing natural POV was to remove notations such as "she noticed" from the text. That takes us away from the immediate experience of the character and places us back as an observer, rather than as a participant. The flashback to memories was also constructed in a manner more akin to real life wherein situations will call forth memories and ideas. At those points, the story follows Ilenia's thought process to the past. In future renditions, interiority is one place in particular I would like to focus so as to give the reader a more natural sensation of Ilenia's experience.

Beyond the internal world I constructed for Ilenia, the external world also provided a host of challenges I did not anticipate when I first set out on this project in Fall 2015. There had to be other people, places, and things in this world. Developing a complex geopolitical background against which my story took place that also served the

story rather than just being background noise was daunting. The setting could not simply be a random place that conveniently had everything I needed. It had to be integrated in, just like everything else on the page. About two years into the project I sketched out a world map, with my limited artistic ability but with desperation for inspiration. It included kingdoms, land features, notes on dazpen territories, and it opened up a world of possibilities. Now my characters could move across a visible landscape. How were certain countries impacted by their location? For instance, Tenven has a lot of pearl decoration because so much of their country borders the sea. Dwarves and sirens could enter my world from the geography with the multitudes of mountains and coasts.

Here is the original map that guided the journey of the novel:



The world also had magic. And developing a system of magic was difficult because all the different peoples had a different type of magic. Elves had magic that was

unique and could potentially be anything. For this I drew inspiration from the multitude of magical abilities in the anime, *Fairy Tail*. There, every single one of the dozens of characters has a unique sort of magic. This can be anything from Maker magic (the ability to manipulate into any form time, wood, ice, water, fire, etc.), to Requip magic (magical armor that can be interchanged instantly), to Celestial Spirit (using keys to call upon the powers of Zodiac and other celestial spirits), and more. I loved the idea of such original uses of magic and wanted those tied more with the elves. For this reason, Queen Corria can open or close anything, which is how she makes portals. Perilon is able to manipulate minds. Humans on the other hand had more elemental magic, so the traditional water, fire, air, earth skills.

In addition to magical systems, magical creatures could enter. For this, Narok was the first major development. He came about inspired by a magical cat from the early drafts. In the early drafts, there was a magical purple cat that would pop up throughout the story. It was revealed later in the story that it was actually the evil elf who could shape shift and assume the form of the cat, the purple coloring from the presence of her magic even in animal form. That morphed in later versions to an animal that could shape shift at will, namely Narok. Once he was created he needed limitations and those came in the form of how he acquired new forms. When he first transforms, he is a small version of the creature. Only with practice is he able to grow in the form and fully assume its abilities. The act of transforming is physically taxing as well so he can't do it all the time, especially when injured.

But as the world expanded, it also needed cuts. Characters were popping up left and right that could easily collapse into one. Many drafts were ruined by the sheer

multitude of characters all clamoring to be included. Some I was rather attached to and loathed to see go. There was a rookie guard who worked with Hiatin named Reynolds whose sarcasm, naïveté, and enthusiasm made him a character I enjoyed writing. But as the story shifted away from the Medean palace it also moved away from Reynolds the Rookie, so he was removed from the story. Though aspects of his personality can certainly be seen in Sophrina's character.

Despite the fact that I had hundreds of pages to work with I still struggled with having too much happening. I would sometimes have too many conflicts crowding in on a story and it drew the focus away from the main plot line. Thus one of the great challenges in this piece was to only include what was necessary. There is still a lot in here that is unnecessary and in later edits will likely be cleared away for more pertinent information.

Looking back on the third act, a major component of the story I want to develop further are the political undertones and interactions of the world. I accidentally crafted a rather complex political scene with half a dozen kingdoms all with unique histories, temperaments, attitudes, and positions that come into conflict repeatedly throughout the story. While I set up many of these conflicts, not all of them were satisfyingly resolved. In future edits of the work, I would love to dig into that background tension and allow it to bring more conflict into the main story, perhaps turning into a strong driving force for many scenes.

In crafting my story, beyond the issues of developing the actual world, characters, and scenarios of the book, I encountered several practical lessons.

It is easy to set deadlines for other people but not so personally. As an organized person I like to have to-do lists and an idea of what I need to do when. However, it can be easy to let things slip by without someone helping with accountability. The value of peer groups was never so clear as it has been working on this thesis. The thesis group helped hold me accountable for deadlines, brainstormed when I got writer's block, and provided feedback to help me develop my story. The people that I worked with were invaluable in the development of the story.

Writer's block was huge issue. Some of this was from procrastinating till deadlines then, in the rush to produce, coming up blank with anything new. Sometimes it was the story not working out or a scene proving to be difficult. Other times it was simply exhaustion. In facing these various situations, different techniques proved helpful. For the times of exhaustion, moving on to another task or taking a break would help, especially if I could get outside and go for a walk. Or eating a snack to help power through, since using your brain consumes calories and glucose so replenishing those helps with function. Other times, it was asking for brainstorming ideas from the thesis pod to spark on a new direction to take a scene or a sequence.

But the most powerful lesson from that was the importance of doing a bit each day. So many times, I proved the hard way that trying to write everything at once fails. And so, like a stubborn horse led to water and refusing to drink, I kept in a vicious cycle of avoiding any issues in the story by just avoiding the story. That never worked. At some point I always had to return to the story and face the problem. So I've come to learn that the best method is to do something each day, even if it is just a page. Sometimes I'd get caught up by the storm of all I had to do and the dozens of pages left

to go and I'd freeze before ever starting. But I've found that doing one more page over and over gets through that work. Learning to celebrate those little victories helped push the entire project to fruition.

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My story is one I love. The characters are people I've grown to care a lot about. I've written journal entries from their perspectives, getting into their heads. I've struggled with how to write them, how they fit into the world of the book. They've let me explore a multitude of different perspectives and personalities from all different angles. When I write, these characters feel like old friends popping up on the page.

My thesis also holds the special place in my heart of being my first fully completed novel ever. There were times in the process when I doubted it could ever happen. Through an enormous amount of grace this work is a full story. It showed to me what could happen when I see a story through to the end, when I leave behind my fourth grade fear of the magnitude of the project and let a story bloom.

The story you hold has elements I have come to love in my favorite tales. Magic, action, romance, and friendship are all involved in these characters' lives. Though I do not suppose that I have written something even close to the books I adore, that's okay. Ira Glass explains that "there is this gap" between our tastes and our abilities, especially starting out. I read that Sarah J Maas first wrote a version of *Throne of Glass* at 16 and the book was not published until 10 years later, when she was 26. I set out on this project to write a book I'd want to read and thus it came to include some of my favorite

elements. The experience in writing with these has been incomparable and given me a new appreciation for the skill I see in the work of other authors.

I aspire for this book to be published someday. I would love for these characters to meet the rest of the world. And I'm going to work to take this book there. This first major milestone in its life, the thesis step, has been a crash course lesson in humility and writing. It has challenged my pride at every step. It has forced me to write as I have never done before. I cannot let this book down by giving up.

Thankfully, I won't do it alone. I only made it this far because of the support of family, friends, teachers, and God. My family instilled in me the love of story from an early age, from reading *Harry Potter* together to now waiting together for the newest Rick Riordan book to be released. My friends were there for late night brainstorming sessions that helped break through to new ideas. And Dr. Sarah J Murray taught me how to be a writer and what impact stories truly have in the world. Finally, throughout the process I often gave it up to God. When I was really stuck, stressed, or particularly aware that this creation was not my doing, I'd give it to God. That's where this really came from. With all this support around me, I can't wait to see where it goes next.

Note: The novel manuscript accompanying this introduction will not be uploaded due to possible future publication.

## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my family. They are the most loving, incredible people I know. I'm so grateful for their love and support in all my projects, including this one. From the first stories I wrote, they've always encouraged me to pursue my love of stories.

So, thank you!

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